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Central Asia



PART 1: The school of death

KABUL - Zurmat is a district in Paktia province south of Kabul. In the parched village of Naik Nam the earth and walls are a blinding white, the mud baked by an unforgiving sun. Drought and poverty have led to neglect of the mud structures, which look like half-destroyed sand castles after the first wave has hit them.

A maze of barely perceptible paths winding through the desert leads to the dunes and homes that hide behind them. Described by United Nations workers as a hotbed, the Taliban are said to be very active in Zurmat, a former Taliban stronghold, after six or seven in the evening.

My guides are two doctors from Zurmat, Dr Omar and Dr Mohammed Qasim. Both men were very nervous as we made our way from Gardez, the provincial capital, to their hometown. At first they took a taxi and then opted for a private car. They dressed me in a *salwar kamis*, a long shirt draped over matching baggy pants, and gave me a cap to complete the disguise. They would be telling locals I was a Saudi, they said, because people there liked Saudis. With an American base nearby, I doubted the wisdom in spreading rumors of a six-foot Saudi visiting a pro-Taliban village, but kept my skepticism to myself.

Dr Mohammed tried to reassure me along the way. "We are Afghans, we are Pashtuns, we will give our heads instead of your's," he said, slitting his throat with his finger and not inspiring confidence. As we approached the village they turned off the music in the car and became silent.

The last journalist to visit Zurmat was Pamela Constable of the Washington Post, for her September 5 article entitled "Afghan Blast Has Alarming Implications". To visit the village the police chief escorted her with two trucks full of Afghan soldiers.

A random sampling of various United Nations daily internal security reports reveals nearly daily "security incidents" in Zurmat. According to the UN, "On August 3, two Maltesier [a German humanitarian organization] employees, traveling back from Zurmat to Gardez in a yellow-white rental car were shot by two unknown gunmen standing on each side of the road, near Niknaam Village, Zurmat District. CFs [coalition forces] found the car, and two persons inside it - one dead and the other, shot six times, severely injured ... The attackers reportedly escaped in their black vehicle."

On August 15, a bomb exploded at a voter registration site in Zurmat, that night rocket-propelled grenades and small arms were fired at the home of a government employee working on the elections. The following day, American soldiers were shot at by a group of men on motorcycles in Zurmat. That same day an American military base was attacked with grenades. Two days later a bomb planted under a bridge killed three and wounded two civilians in Zurmat. Not only are there terrorist and insurgent attacks, but internal violence as well. The security reports describe a September 14 incident in which two tribes clashed with small arms because of an old dispute in Zurmat.

The Post's Constable had come to investigate an explosion in a *madrassa*, or school, that had

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killed 10 people. On August 29 three American employees of defense contractor Dyncorp were killed when a car bomb detonated outside their offices. This high profile attack obscured the afternoon explosion in the Mullah Khel school in Zurmat, 90 miles to the south. In her article Constable claims the school was targeted by the Taliban, speculating that the motives were either its relatively modern curriculum or the involvement of its teachers in voter registration. The bomb, she said, was hidden in a motorcycle and caused the deaths of nine students and one teacher.



The bombed school.

The notion that children were targeted is terrible indeed, but the truth is no less disturbing in its implications. In reality, according to Mullah Qari Nazir Mohammed, a teacher in the school, as well as Drs Mohammed and Omar, who work in the town and other witnesses, the school was hosting seven young Taliban, or religious students, aged 18 to 21, who were being instructed in the construction of remote-controlled bombs. As often happens elsewhere, including Palestine, the inexperienced teacher accidentally detonated the bomb, bringing the lesson to a terrible end. All seven Taliban were killed and their corpses had no arms and bore signs of close exposure to the explosion. In the adjacent pathway between the next classroom a parked motorcycle was destroyed, though it did not contain the bomb, as Constable's article claimed. Tragically, the ceiling collapsed on the classroom across the narrow pathway, killing three students in teacher Sahar Gul's class. The seven dead Taliban, whom Constable had mistakenly



Collateral damage ... the motorcycle wrongly claimed to have carried the bomb.

included in her count of dead students, were visiting from different *madrassas* in the region, including Logar and Ghazni provinces.

Another religious student, Qari Daud, described his shock at witnessing Taliban training openly in bomb construction in *madrassas* in the border area of Miran Shah and elsewhere. The townspeople in Zurmat were reluctant to admit to Constable that their school was being used for a dual purpose, educating previously unschooled children in an "accelerated learning program", including mathematics, Pashtu, religion and art and providing a regional seminar in bomb-making techniques. There had been 25 students officially in the class, and an additional 13 who were not registered but attended anyway to receive a basic education. After the blast people from the neighboring 50 families in the area rushed to the site to dig the victims out of the rubble.

Twenty-six-year-old Sahar Gul still limps from wounds he suffered when a wall collapsed on him in his classroom, pinning him for an hour. It was his students who were killed, as he was teaching, and in the remaining wall of the classroom a chalkboard with some scribbling and a map of the world still hung unscathed. The slightly cross-eyed Gul was paid US\$50 a month by the Afghan Women's Education Center, an Afghan organization run by a female doctor originally from Paktia, Shinkai Zahine, that supports 400 teachers like Gul in Paktia province alone. Gul sat with the village elders in his guest room, its floors and walls decorated with colorful



Teacher Sahar Gul in his destroyed classroom.

traditional carpets and tapestries. A silent anonymous female hand reached into the room from behind a door offering a tray with green tea, and raisins, nuts and toffees were also served.

Gul and the village elders feigned ignorance when asked about the presence of Taliban forces in their area. Bismillah Shah, a weathered elder who lost two nephews in the explosion, says, "These people who fight the Americans or Afghan army don't want to develop our country, but we don't know who they are." Like many Pashtuns, he was ambivalent about the American presence in his country. "We have not had any problems with the Americans, we have not seen anything from them, good or bad," he said.

Paktia has one of the highest rates of voter registration in Afghanistan ahead of the October 9 presidential elections, and Shah proudly pulled out his registration card from his front pocket.



Shah, the village elder.

"Elections are very good," he said, "we need them for the future of our country." Forty-seven percent of Paktia's women are registered, as were all the wives of the men present in the room. Shah added that they aspired only for "security, to be able to walk, talk and work". The men agreed that they wanted an Islamic government. Dr Omar explained to me that "people here think democracy means boys and girls will be together and women will walk uncovered".

In the Zurmat bazaar, a dusty collection of barely standing wooden shacks, 40-year-old shopkeeper Zainullah sat drinking tea surrounded by mounds of spices, henna, nuts, soaps and every imaginable item. He had been waiting excitedly to get his registration card, he said. "After 25 years it's the first chance the Afghan people have." He was pleased with the American presence nearby. "Nowadays our government cannot stand by itself. Security was good under the Taliban and now it is not," he said, "With the help of these forces our government will stand. The Americans are here temporarily, not permanently. We don't have a full army." When asked whom he might vote for, he was unequivocal. "All of Zurmat, no all of Kabul, no all Afghans want [President Hamid] Karzai. He has no enemies and doesn't make differences between Tajiks and Pashtuns."

Dr Mohammed left Afghanistan when he was seven and lived as a refugee in Pakistan, returning to Afghanistan to work as a doctor. He worried about the support Pakistan was giving to radical elements in his country. "The main enemy of our country is Pakistan," he said, "They don't want us to have peace. We are between two fires, Pakistan and Iran." Though he aspired to specialize in the chest and receive training abroad, Dr Mohammed was working as a social worker in Zurmat now. "People here have spent 25 years with guns and it will take time to turn their attention to knowledge," he said, and worried that "the *madrassas* are tools for terrorists pretending to teach but making students into terrorists."

TOMORROW: Part 2 Idealism in a hostile territory

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